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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 1457

INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE

RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 2042

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1907

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 4230

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 2478

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 2836

RHMFIUU/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EUR/ACE, SCA/PPD, ECA, IIP
AID/W FOR EE/EA

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: INTERNET ACCESS HIGHLIGHTED ON FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL

¶1. (SBU) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY: To mark the opening of the new school year, President Berdimuhamedov opened impressive white-marbled educational facilities that highlighted his emphasis on Internet and technology in the classroom and sports. Some elements of the opening ceremonies resembled Niyazov-era events in style, but some of the substance was a clear improvement over the first President's education policy. END SUMMARY.

OPENING CEREMONIES

¶3. (U) In typical, official-Turkmen ceremonial fashion, President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov opened new schools and a new university building to mark the first day of school, September 1, following the summer break. In Ashgabat, the president opened newly constructed schools 76 and 77, and a new Physics and Mathematics building at Turkmen State University. In addition, while using the Internet computer lab in school no. 77, Berdimuhamedov blessed and viewed the opening of school no. 5 in Gypchak village (east of Ashgabat) via Internet link as well as schools in Turkmenabat and Yeklary Gengesh.

The openings were covered at length on Turkmen State TV's "WATAN" evening news program, and repeated the following day. TV coverage showed the President joining students in classrooms and science labs, as well as observing sports activities in newly-built sports facilities.

¶4. (SBU) There was a heavy emphasis on technology in the science labs. Each student had a piece of state of the art lab equipment, even if it didn't quite fit. There was a microscope in a Physics lab. One Physics lab had lasers and another instruments to measure wavelength. The Biology lab had large plastic eyes and hearts. The president admired Turkmen language Chemistry books in that class.

¶5. (SBU) Reminiscent of Niyazov-era events, the ceremonies included crowds of cheering students waving flags and balloons, multiple music and dance performances, as well as many well-rehearsed declarations of gratitude to the President for the new school buildings and facilities. The continued focus on infrastructure and aesthetics were typical, with no mention of programmatic elements such as teacher training or curricula development.

INTERNET AND TECHNOLOGY TAKE CENTER STAGE

¶ 16. (SBU) In contrast to Niyazov-era school openings, a large focus was placed on use of Internet and satellite links to other government institutions and locations in Turkmenistan. In addition to opening school no. 5 in Gypchak via the Internet, the President noted that the schools were linked to the "Virtual Silk Road" network, originally sponsored by NATO, and expressed his thanks to the diplomatic corps for such support. Also highlighted were a wireless Internet classroom with laptop computers, as well as language learning laboratories, computer classes, science labs, and many of the now ubiquitous multimedia boards for classroom teaching.

SPORTS RETURN TO SCHOOLS

¶ 17. (SBU) Another contrast to Niyazov-era schools was the heavy emphasis placed on gymsnasiums, swimming pools, and other sports facilities. TV coverage showed the president watching children swim laps, play volleyball, basketball, practice gymnastics and other multiple, well-staged athletic activities. In addition, close up shots of posters displayed in sports facilities showed the president, mountain biking, prepared for driving a brightly decorated Kamaz truck, and also dressed in a full Tae Kwon Do outfit with black belt while sparring or instructing a young boy in the sport. (NOTE: Post is not aware of the president holding a black belt. END NOTE.)

¶ 17. (SBU) COMMENT: Post sees Berdimuhamedov's emphasis on education, Internet and sports as a positive sign of improvement

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over first President Niyazov's policies that decimated these fields. These steps are a dramatic improvement over the situation less than two years ago in education and should not be diminished by lack of steady improvement in other areas. While the new facilities are very impressive, post is aware of serious programmatic deficiencies in teacher training, staffing levels, textbooks, and the real availability of Internet to students or teachers - or their ability to use the Internet. Unfortunately, most schools are still housed in dilapidated Soviet-era buildings, and only a handful have officially been wired for Internet. END COMMENT.

CURRAN